

Record: 1

Title: Stein is nice.

Authors: Koestenbaum, Wayne

Source: Parnassus: Poetry in Review. 1995, Vol. 20 Issue 1/2, p297. 23p.

Document Type: Literary Criticism

Subject Terms: *CRITICISM

People: STEIN, Gertrude, 1874-1946

Abstract: Discusses the work of author Gertrude Stein. Books on Stein; Names as the central amusement or beauty; Luxuries and banalities; Focus on soap; Queerness; Stein's public persona; Stein's recommendation of sitting; Stein's quest for the redefinition of beauty.

Full Text Word Count: 8377

ISSN: 0048-3028

Accession Number: 9510046906

Database: Academic Search Complete

STEIN IS NICE

1

Reading Gertrude Stein takes enormous patience. The skeptical reader might wonder: What if Stein is not worth this level of attentiveness? What if her writing doesn't reward close scrutiny?

Ask of your own life the same hard question: What if you stare fervently into your own mind and discover nothing there?

Stein insists that we enlarge our capacities--even if the enterprise turns out to be bankrupt. Reading Stein, we imagine a literature, a cognition, that demands inordinate latitude and longitude; we hypothesize a literature as vast and self-sufficient as she imagined hers to be. Whether or not Stein achieved it, by reading her we are postulating the existence of such a spacious poetics; we are bringing such a poetics into being, even if it only exists in the form of the ambitions we attribute to Stein, the fealty that she requires of us, the expectations that she arouses and then excuses. Reading Stein is a process of having desire excited and then forgiven: She says, you wanted a literature as huge and undetermined as the one I am offering you. I forgive you for the hedonism and the hubris of that wish.

Be nice to Stein; you will thereby learn to be tolerant of your own Steinian voracity--a hunger for sentences, a dissatisfaction with every extant sentence except those that you invented, an intolerance for any sentence that you are not in the midst of writing.

2

Much of Stein's work remains unread, classified as unreadable. Three recent offerings begin to change this picture: Ulla E. Dydo's masterful compilation of largely forgotten Stein pieces, *A Stein Reader*, in a handsome purple-covered paperback from Northwestern University Press, complete with detailed headnotes but, mercifully, no footnotes; Sun & Moon's pristine ivory-covered reissue of *Stanzas in Meditation*; and Dalkey Archive Press's reissue of *A Novel of Thank You*, with an illuminating introduction by critic Steven Meyer. Dydo

has criticized Sun & Moon for reprinting what she calls, with reason, a "corrupt" text of the Stanzas a revised version, in which, at the insistence of Alice B. Toklas, Stein removed and disguised the many occurrences of the word "may," which apparently were oblique references to Stein's former lover May Bookstaver. Though I look forward to an edition of the "original" Stanzas, with all the "Mays" intact, I am nonetheless grateful to have this reprint of the 1956 Yale University Press edition, which John Ashbery, among others, read, and which therefore has a certain literary-historical importance, whatever its textual inconsistencies.

The reappearance, in the last two years, of these major Stein works (more are forthcoming: Sun & Moon promises the publication of Stein's magnum opus, the thousand-page *The Making of Americans*) means that the odd Stein, not the Stein of the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, but the defiant *Baby Wooms* of *Stanzas in Meditation*, has become part of our contemporary literary landscape. And yet some of the pleasure of Stein whether in print or out of print--consists in the difficulty of access to her texts and her meanings, and the privacy that this affords her reader. Because academics have largely left Stein uncolonized, she is still free to function, in our reading and writing lives, apart from fossilized rules of what matters and why it matters. Because Stein doesn't quite count, as a modernist or as a postmodernist; because her reputation combines the offbeat and the central (a wonderful paradox, the major minor writer, or the minor major), we are free to make of her what we wish, and to read her more obscure texts in a state of liberated remoteness from dogma, protocol, and usefulness. There have been convincing feminist and lesbian reappraisals of Stein's work, including such studies as Harriet Scott Chessman's *The Public Is Invited to Dance* (Stanford University Press), and Language poets have laid claim to the anti-referential Stein; but despite these moves to make Stein useful, she remains under-read, and therefore neutral. Her texts can be marshalled, coherently and legitimately, to bolster a thousand different arguments; but there will always be a Stein text--say, *A Long Gay Book* which no one will have bothered to explain and which no one is reading, and which, therefore, if you choose to read it, you will be more or less alone with it, alone with Stein, and at liberty to use it or not use it as you see fit, without having to explain her meanings or nonmeanings to any authorities, without having to summarize or redact, without even having to remember it, after you've put it down. Because you won't ever have time to read all of Stein (there will always be more manuscripts, more letters), she will forever exceed your grasp, resist enclosure, and permit you, therefore, to reverse and foil your own grasping readerly gestures. Reading Stein is always reading in a void, reading the void, reading to avoid--to avoid plot, significance, work, pain, and the past.

Stein is not about anything. She will not force anything on you, except her own dreams of magnificence, and her certainty that her magnificence is your property, too; because she's void, it doesn't matter who owns her sentences. They're not worth anything; but because they evade accounting, and because they do not circulate with any regularity, it is your right to determine their worth. And it will not be a tragedy if you decide that they are worthless. Even if they're radically devalued, they won't vanish: There are too many. Even if each sentence is worth only a penny, pennies add up.

I am at liberty, reading Stein, to interpret or not interpret her as I see fit--because she occupies a nether world (the territory of the majestic has-been) where magnification and diminution occur at a startling frequency, without warning; and where the perversity and eccentricity of individual taste still hold sway.

Stein writes against maturity, against development. Her writing is "a rested development." She rests--naps, dreams--by enjoying the arrested state of going nowhere.

Stein's paradigm of the writer was the baby: the author as infant. Alice B. Toklas and Carl Van Vechten referred to her as Baby Woolf. But in Stein's terms, to be a baby is not to be asexual. In fact, Stein's babyishness, her immaturity, is a profoundly sexual condition. From "Mildred's Thoughts" (reprinted in *A Stein Reader*):

Baby I am happily married Baby. To whom am I happily married.

Baby I am happily married to my husband. Baby. And to whom is my husband married.

Baby. My husband is married to me. Baby. And to whom is my husband happily married. Baby. My husband is happily married to me.

Baby. When was I married.

Baby. I was married like a queen before I was seen.

Baby. And how was I seen.

Baby. As a baby queen. Baby. And so I was married as a baby it would seem.

To be a baby is a condition of supreme mastery: Like Emily Dickinson, Stein constructed a literary system in which she was undisputed potentate--a Baby Queen, enjoying full sexual privileges. We need to approach Baby's throne if we want to understand the system; but Baby is too busy with her pleasures to answer our petty queries.

4

In Stein, the central amusement or beauty is often the name, the proper noun, that arrives, unexplained, uncontextualized. Jane Bowles and John Ashbery give this pleasure, too (they might have borrowed it from Stein): A character in Bowles's fragment, "Friday," announces, "My name is Agnes Leather," and we are free, as readers, to meditate on Leather and Agnes, their interpenetration, without the narrator moderating the debate. In Stein, the proper name offers respite from dry diction and nonreferentiality; the proper name seems to refer to some-one--seems to bring with it a plot, a teleology (this person was born, desired, died)--but the context never appears, and the name sits solitary on our plate. In *Stanzas*, Stein writes:

I think very well of Susan but I do not know her name
I think very well of Ellen but which is not the same
I think very well of Paul I tell him not to do so
I think very well of Francis Charles but do I do so
I think very well of Thomas but I do not not do so
I think very well of not very well of William

Knowledge and ignorance co-exist; I think very well of Susan but I do not know her name, even if I can say "Susan." The name is the tip of gossip's iceberg; each name implies a verdict, a titter, a possible condemnation. Has the person behaved appropriately? Or has Susan disobeyed? Is Susan a saint? In Stein, names canonize; just to be named is to become part of a Parnassian *dramatis personae*.

My favorite name in all of Stein is "Kitty Buss." The name is amusing because each word--Kitty, Buss--has a secondary connotation. "Kitty" is a diminutive for "kitten"; "buss" is slang for "to kiss." This is the Agnes Leather effect: To the reader, "Agnes Leather" is a marriage of lamb and leather, not a person. Similarly, Stein writes, in "Pink Melon Joy," "James Death is a nice name." The last name is death, but it is also just his name. Therefore the phrase "James Death" goes somewhere--to-ward meaning, toward "death"--but also sits plumply

motionless on the page, just a name of someone we'll never know, James Death (inevitably I misread it as James Dean).

Stein understood that names are comic, accurate, and eerie. They signify our social and psychological identities but they also allegorize us--turn us into death, into kitty, into leather. The buzz of names in Stein's work, like entering a party and hearing the pleasant roar of conversations and laughter, reminds us that people are everywhere, that society (Stein's work reflects and rewrites society) is full of over-determined relationships and kinship structures, most of which we won't be able to figure out or master. In "Saints and Singing" (from *The Stein Reader*), she writes, "Constance and Elisabeth have not the same name. One is Constance Street and the other is Elisabeth Elkus." Constance and Elisabeth stop at their names: street and elkus prematurely arrest the process of identification even while seeming to justify the arrest by saying, "Now we know who you are: you are street, you are elkus."

5

Constance Street is not my business. Most of human history is not my business. Despite Stein's ample desire to include everything in her work--in *The Making of Americans* she attempted a history of every kind of human being who had ever lived--she also relentlessly specialized, deciding what mattered to her, and dispensing with all dross. In *Lectures in America* she wrote, "It is awfully important to know what is and what is not your business. I know that one of the most profoundly exciting moments of my life was when at about sixteen I suddenly concluded that I would not make all knowledge my province." Desire's specialization: Stein chose language, and Alice. I choose Stein, and language: I choose Stein as a way of choosing language. Stein's private life was not our business: and so she omitted it (except as it appears in code) from her texts. To choose Stein is to refuse every other writer.

Your only business, when reading Stein, is the sentence before your eyes. Not the sentence you've just finished, or the sentence you're about to begin. Just the sentence unfolding right now. To attempt to synthesize Stein's attributes or stories is an infringement on her privacy; what Stein meant, or how the sentences fit together, is not the reader's business. The reader's business is the sentence as it stands. And to have one's responsibilities limited, in this fashion, is a tremendous relief; Stein allows one the peacefulness of staring into space--her space.

6

The story in a Stein text--even those, like "Miss Furr and Miss Skeene," that purport to have a sort of plot--is the way a word, or a set of words, permutates, the way a word, like a reusable train ticket, is used (or stamped, or perforated) by the various sentences and fragments it passes through. What the word means is none of your business, but it is indubitably your business where the word travels. So in "Miss Furr and Miss Skeene" your business is the travel of "quite," of "voice," of "regular," of "cultivating," of "living," of "then," of "not," of "sat," of "stayed," of "little things," and of "gay." What "gay" means will not be decided; but you can follow where "gay" goes, how "gay" moves, impatient and ambulatory, through sentences--so that "gay" begins to seem a drive or a propulsive force more than a stable attribute or personality characteristic. Similarly, reading "A Book Concluding With As A Wife Has A Cow A Love Story," your business is "cow," "wife," "as," "love story," "day," "prepare," "happening," "expect," "now," "just," "feel," "six," and "and." These are the significant players, whose movements the reader must monitor. Or simply observe their progress, lazily noting their recurrence. Be surprised by their absence and then relieved by their sudden reappearance.

7

The world of Stein may be divided into two categories: luxuries and banalities. The principal luxuries in Stein's work are its profusion, its repetitions, and its magnanimity. The principal banality lies in the flat language--plain, straight, uninflected. But this banality is extremely comforting. No synthesis, no summary, will demand your attention; you may wander safely, without guidepost, in an unremarkable countryside of adverbs, nouns, conjunctions, and simple verbs. Plainness allows sensuality: Note, in the following passage from *A Long Gay Book* (reprinted in its entirety in *A Stein Reader*), how she first asserts the importance of being plain--almost as if plainness were an ethical imperative--and then how this assertion of plainness permits her the sudden delectation of "blue houses and a blue horizon" (the strange introduction of the sensual and the visible into a heretofore solely cerebral framework); and then, note how plainness permits privacy, and, in turn, permits singing (i.e., writing):

To begin to be plain. To begin to be plain is a plain duty. The right to be plain is a plain right. The resumption of being plain is the resuming being plain. There is a conviction and a satisfaction and a resemblance between blue houses and blue horizon.

A private life is the long thick tree and the private life is the life for me. A tree which is thick is a tree which is thick. A life which is private is not what there is. All the times that come are the times I sing, all the singing I sing are the tunes I sing. I sing and I sing and the tunes I sing are what are tunes if they come and I sing. I sing I sing.

We want Stein to sing; and we want, ourselves, to have the liberty of singing. To reach the land of singing one must travel through banality and plainness. It is difficult to achieve plainness--to renounce embroidery and narrative, to refuse community and location. Stein's plainness and her privacy are equivalent, hardwon possessions: Through them, she may begin to sing.

What is ugly in Stein's writing--or plain--is therefore potentially beautiful, if you see it as the necessary penance that earns privacy, and therefore earns sensuality, vision (blue houses, blue horizon), and song.

8

I don't know how frequently Stein bathed, or washed her hands; but I do know that an essential ingredient in this private world that Stein's plain language champions (and encourages us to claim for ourselves) is soap, that hard and soft, vanishing and permanent household object that Francis Ponge celebrated in his prose-poem, *Le Savon*, whose tide implies a missing nous: nous le savon[s]. We know it. What do we know? Not much: After all, as Stein instructed, we've decided not to make all knowledge our province. The little we know we're also happy to rinse off. It's possible to think of Stein's work as one long rinsing or cleansing operation: The sentences that remain are the suds, or the dirt that gathers in the sink basin, traces of a past ablution. To wash is to spend: Just as Stein's sentences don't assemble or accrete into hard currency, but resemble a miser's hoardings (or a spendthrift's trail of bounced checks), so her sentences might be considered a gleefully repeated act of masturbation as well as its Lady Macbeth self-regulating corrective, handwashing. The dialectic of progress/stasis that informs all of Stein's compositions (we're getting somewhere, we're getting nowhere) obeys soap's law: Soap only serves its function in the process of disappearing; you must rub and unmake soap in order to enjoy its cleansing properties; using soap corrects and recapitulates the act of primary autoeroticism.

Stein on soap, from *A Long Gay Book* "This is the time to say that a bath is not so dean when there is no soap to be seen. A bath is clean when the bather has the wish to state and is fulfilling everything." Imagine Stein's

entire collected opus as a single painting--a representation of a woman engaged in an absorbing, uncompleted action. Would you call the painting "La Lectrice" (the reader) or would you call it "La Baigneuse" (the bather)? In either case this painting--Stein's work exposes a solitary ritual, and is informed by a queer amalgam of intentness (goal-oriented action) and futility (self-indulgent idleness).

9

The best single adjective to describe Stein's sensibility and style is "queer," not simply because of the word's association with sex-and-gender ambiguity, but because of the word's evocation of what is simultaneously uncanny and pleasure-giving in a phenomenon's or a person's refusal to match a predetermined grid. Again and again, the word turns up in Stein, usually to signify a moment of stubbornness, refusal, displeasure, fear--combined with the exhilaration that comes from defiant inexplicability. An example, again from *A Long Gay Book* "It is a queer thing that singing is a common thing." Is singing queer? Or is it queer that singing, a sign of divine election, should also, paradoxically, be common, dispersed among all of a democracy's members? Here, in a passage from *The Making of Americans*, "queer" signifies the ability of words to flee their meanings: "Categories that once to some one had real meaning can later to that same one be all empty. It is queer that words that meant something in our thinking and our feeling can later come to have in them in us not at all any meaning." Words experience the gravitational pull of nonmeaning, or of fluctuating significance: This, Stein suggests, is a queer tug. A word or a category is queered when it slips away from what it has been. For Stein's purposes, and, momentarily, mine, it doesn't matter what category the word or the person had been inhabiting; what counts is the experience of slipping away from past definitional fixity. It should come as no surprise to any serious reader of poetry that not just Stein's but everybody's language, particularly in dense or highly coded literary artifacts, experiences a similar epistemological slippage. Stein's contribution to the literature of slippage is that she gave a personality to this tropic pull exerted on language; she made the queerness of words seem her own personal queerness, or made language's slipperiness seem a reflection of her own psychological and stylistic eccentricity.

For Stein, the process of writing was itself marked by this queerness, an uncertainty of position inspired not only by language's eerie liquidity, but by the social ostracism that comes from a lifelong practice of eccentric utterance. Dydo, in her preface to *A Stein Reader*, quotes Stein on the difficulty of extreme writing: "You know you will be laughed at or pitied by every one and you have a queer feeling and you are not certain and you go on writing." Stein's charm: She stubbornly goes on, despite or because of the queer feelings, despite or because of being thought queer. Again, from *The Making of Americans*: "It is a queer feeling that one has in them and perhaps it is, that they have something queer in them something that gives to one a strange uncertain feeling with them for their heads are on them as puling babies heads are always on them and it gives to one a queer uncertain feeling to see heads on big women that look loose and wobbly on them." Queerness consists in big women having the looseness--the lability?--of babies. Or else queerness, in another passage from *The Making*, consists in alien truculence, a refusal to be assimilated to genteel ways: "Mrs. Hersland never liked to have queer people near her she wanted her servants to be of the same kind of nature that was natural to her in the living at Bridgepoint the good living that was natural to her, she needed a servant around her that she Mrs. Hersland in her feeling could be of her and above her, she never wanted any servant to have servant queerness in her."

By invoking queerness I do not mean to imply that Stein's texts may be "solved" by finding the key to her codes, particularly the sexual ones. Stein's writing is at once luminously clear about lesbian sexual pleasure, and bafflingly nonspecific. She opens her erotic "A Book Concluding With As A Wife Has A Cow A Love Story"

with an invocation to a closet, and to a possible key, but any simple inside/outside formulation immediately dissipates, and even if we've been presented with a phantom "key," we don't in the least believe that it has the power to unlock anything.

KEY TO CLOSET.

There is a key.

There is a key to a closet that opens the drawer. And she keeps both so that neither money nor candy will go suddenly, Fancy, baby, new year. She keeps both so that neither money nor candy will go suddenly, Fancy baby New Year, fancy baby mine, fancy.

Closets and keys, and certainties of locking and unlocking meaning, disappear, as the repetitive litany of baby pleasures and luxuries resumes, with its notes of fanciness, of beginning (New Year), and of quick exchanges and pleasures (money, candy). No key will unlock Baby's heart; or, Baby is already unlocked, and it is not Baby's concern to spoonfeed comprehension to us.

Despite the freedom with which Gertrude, in her texts (which may be interpreted, all of them, as a continuous love letter to Alice, her primary audience and amanuensis), displays a lesbian sexuality which it doesn't take a highly schooled set of linguistic keys to decode (part of the pleasure of Stein, in fact, is the ability to interpret almost any of her texts from an erotic vantage point), in "real" life she seems to have been rather reticent about revealing her lesbianism, even to friends. According to Samuel ("Sammy") M. Steward, in his memoir of Stein, she spoke to him openly about lesbianism only once, at which time she said, "I like all people who produce and Alice does too and what they do in bed is their own business, and what we do is not theirs." And she said, "most of our really good friends don't care and they know all about everything. But perhaps considering Saint Paul it would be better not to talk about it, say for twenty years after I die, unless it's found out sooner or times change. But if you are alive and writing then you can go ahead and tell it, I would rather it came from a friend than an enemy or a stranger." Certainly much of the work that appears in *A Stein Reader*, including such libertine texts as "Pink Melon Joy," is wildly candid about incoherent, unclassified, and socially unsanctioned sexuality. Therefore it's poignant to speculate that Stein in person (at least with her dear Sammy) could not speak as openly, as libidinally, as she could in her difficult literary texts--or that she may not have been entirely aware of how nakedly her texts revealed erotic agendas.

10

I am haunted by the title of Jane Bowles's short story collection, *Everything Is Nice*. Of course Bowles thought that nothing was nice. The phrase "everything is nice," perfectly bland, comes from a sensibility so aggrieved, so consumed by its consciousness of the world's flaws, that the mind has energy to formulate only the most attenuated generalization. Similarly, Stein is so assured of her genius, and so assured of the world's ability to remain itself without being imitated--why bother with mimesis?--that she can rest content with platitudes, with vague phrases that point to objects but don't plumb or describe them. Such as, in *A Long Gay Book*, "This is cute." What is cute? It doesn't matter. Everything is cute. She need not flatter the world by reproducing it; in her sentences she pats reality on the head, saying "Nice dog"--a technique of shelving and pushing aside the patted object. Stein is, like most babies, cute; I note her cuteness. I don't want to describe, paraphrase, or reproduce her. In this critical assessment, I don't want to aim toward mimesis. Instead, I want to act toward Stein as she acted, in her sentences, toward the material and affective world: I want to say, "Nice! Cute!" In "Geography," reprinted in *A Stein Reader*, she writes, "Geography as nice. Comes next geography. Geography

as nice comes next geography comes geography." Stein is nice. I want to go no farther than this: nice Stein, cute Stein.

Stein was also not nice, and not cute. Hence "nice" and "cute," and other platitudes, point away from bad temper and discontent, distracting us with a veneer of good mood. Stein's work enrages, expresses rage; but it also writes the fiat, non-undulating geography of contentment.

11

Next to "nice" and "cute" sits "fat." Stein's public persona was "fat" and her writing, too, sold its own solidity and pulchritude--fat with densely typeset pages; fat with meaning, fat with the refusal of meaning; fat with privilege; fat with isolation, the tinned meat (confit, foie gras) of exile. When "fat"--the word, the concept--appears in Stein, it signifies complacency, freedom, prosodic waywardness. To be fat is to be nice, cute, safe, and exempt. In "Pink Melon Joy" Stein writes, in a passage subtitled "Fourteen days":

I meant to be closeted.
I should have been thin.
I was aching.

Should Stein--her body, her text--have been thin? Certainly not, the devoted reader answers. In "Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights" (reprinted in *A Stein Reader*), Stein wonders

What does a fatty do
She does not pay for it.
No she does not
Does not pay for it.

That is the joy and importance of the fatty: not paying for it. Babies at their best are fat; a writing life that enjoys its own pleasures and obscene fluidities is a fat life. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests in the provocative title of her collection of poems, *Fat Art, Thin Art*: Do we want a fat art or a thin art? Do we want an art of penury or of expansion? Is it possible to have one without the other? Is prose fat, and is poetry thin? Was Stein's art, despite its obvious fatness, also thin--avoiding the solidity of faithful representation? Avoiding the meat and potatoes of real American life?

To pursue a fat art is to pay attention to the food in front of you on the table. As Alice B. Toklas--and the meals she made--always underwrites Stein's production, so all of Stein's formulations can be reduced to food, to nutriment, not only works, like "Tender Buttons," which self-consciously refer to food. For to write a swelling prose poetry like Stein's is to confess that nourishment has been had. She writes in *A Long Gay Book* "When the twin is not one and there has been a fat one the thin one is not losing delicate existing. Singing is everything." If singing--or writing--is everything, must not we give the fatty every inch of privilege and room that she needs? Stein's demand for space and more space includes an insistence that her body, the body of her work, not be starved by the usual decorums, and that her oeuvre, fat and maybe bad for you (think of all the butter and cream that Toklas's recipes require), be allowed its extra-large seat.

Stein refused conventional referentiality; and yet her difficult work always returns to two comforting materialities--the sexual body, and the food that nourishes it. From *A Long Gay Book*: "If the potato was there and the light were bright then it would be sweet to be clean and to have the same seat. It is always necessary to carry the same piece of bread and butter. It is nicely brown and yellow and prettily sticking together that with what it is when it is where it is and it is where it is as it is only where it is. It is the particular attraction by which it is the piece that is eating and being eaten. It is mentionable. It is not deceptive. It is the practice of everything. It is what is necessary." Stein relates to language as a cook (or a hungry eater) relates to staples: Her interest

is not in the elite concoction, but in the ordinary ingredient, the "it" and "and," the slice of nicely buttered bread. From "Bon Marche Weather" (in The Stein Reader):

Very nice eating everybody is having. Very nice eating I am having. Very nice eating they are having. Very nice eating you are having.

Very comfortable travelling they are having.

12

Travel is nice, especially if you suspend belief in destination.

Where are one's thoughts directed at any moment? Impossible to fix them. Stein's writing celebrates and enacts cognition's travel. Emily Dickinson wrote, in a letter: "To shut our eyes is Travel." Stein put this aphorism into practice: She shut her eyes--turned her back to the landscape--and then traveled where her sentences led her, and didn't describe the destination but rendered instead the systematic movement of sentences toward the unspecified. Although her writing is often nonreferential, it always refers to the migration of thought, the freefloating movement of a mind at peace with its own fatness. From "Mildred's Thoughts": "Mildred's thoughts are where. There with pear, with the pears and the stairs Mildred's thoughts are there with the pear with the stairs and the pears. Mildred be satisfied with tomatoes, apples, apricots, plums, and peaches, beets and ever greens, peas and potatoes." Where are Mildred's--or Gertrude's--or the reader's--thoughts? In the pantry. The mind follows the stomach. The sentence digests the anticipated repast.

As Stein's sentences enjoy and preach the freedom of the wandering mind, so all of Stein, taken together, reads like a travel brochure for an island--a place of difference, of separation from the mainstream and the mainland. Reading Stein, I want to travel to the position of umpire privilege (she who calls the shots) from which she seemed to write and reign. From "Mildred's Thoughts": "I have decided that in any case I will love islands. Islands are to the main land what poetry is to plays." Stein is literature's island of exemption--freedom from any rule that might interfere with the exercise of high caprice.

This land where Stein may write as and when and if and how she pleases--this island, far from the mainland, is also far from capital (cultural, economic, national): She writes, in "Capitals Capitals" (reprinted in A Stein Reader), "Capitals are the places where every one exactly deprecates the necessity of going away, where every one deprecates the necessity there is to stay where every one utters a welcome that is sufficiently stirring and where every one does know what makes them so, so what so very nearly wider." Do we want to know what makes us so? Or do we say so what? All Stein wants is respite from a deprecation that her extravagant eccentricity will continue to incite. Stein's oeuvre is a place where the reader may experience a misbehavior that provokes deprecation, and an elaborate brochure for a journey away from deprecation, away from punishment, away from any rituals but one's own bodily and mental processes.

13

Stein pleases herself; she leads the willing reader to imagine a regime of self-pleasure. From "Capitals Capitals": "I know why I say what I do say. I say it because I feel a great deal of pleasure of satisfaction of repetition"--and why not continue, thinks Stein, since I am having so much fun?--"of indication of separation of direction of preparation of declaration of stability of precaution of accentuation and of attraction." Stein is attracted, here, to "-tion" words, to nouns that describe her own virtues of settledness, of stubborn repose. Why write, Stein suggests, except to please yourself?

Self-pleased writing is not simply arrogant; rather, it earns a reader's trust by sufficing, without supplement. You are permitted to forget a Stein sentence the moment you finish reading it. Her writing perpetually toys with its own erasure: Thus it always promises the reader relief from having to memorize, to learn, to sift. As she refused to believe in the unconscious, so she disavowed subtext, despite her plethora of double entendres and puns: The writing is exactly what it seems on the surface. It has no hidden depths. In "Identity A Poem" (from *A Stein Reader*) she observes, "It is extraordinary that when you are acquainted with a whole family you can forget about them." Likewise, it is extraordinary that once you finish a Stein text you can forget it; it bears you no grudge if you dismiss it forever from consciousness.

The condition advocated by Stein's texts is sitting. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein suggests that Toklas might have called her memoir "The wives of geniuses I have sat with." What does sitting mean? Alice sat with the wives: To sit, in this case, means to wait patiently, to occupy a subordinate position. A model sits for a painter, as Stein sat for Picasso. Stein herself wrote many word portraits, including the *Autobiography*, in which Alice sits, as subject, for Stein. Alice also baby-sat Stein: She minded Baby Woolums. To sit is to be patient, to be represented, but also to be lazy or immobile--to refuse to stand up, to refuse direction. Said "Alice" in the *Autobiography*, about Stein's sitting practice: "Mademoiselle Stein has no patience she will not go into offices and wait and interview people and explain, so I do it for her while she sits in the automobile." This is the conceptual posture in which Stein's work takes place: sitting.

Above all Stein did not want to be bored. From the *Autobiography*: "Gertrude Stein desperately unhappy said to me, where is Louvain. Don't you know, I said. No, she said, nor do I care, but where is it." Above all one must remember this about Stein: she did not care. And yet she asked "where is Louvain"; she tolerated the civilized insistence that place names refer to specific sites, even though location for her was malleable and relative. From the *Autobiography*: "You should I think suggest to the french government that they give us Pondichery. After lunch Gertrude Stein said to me under her breath, where the hell is Pondichery." Where the hell is anywhere. Stein, as dandy, understood that refusing boredom is one's first obligation: "Her very close friend Marion Walker pleaded with her, she said, but Gertrude Gertrude remember the cause of women, and Gertrude Stein said, you don't know what it is to be bored." Early in life Stein discovered the horror of boredom, and although she went on to write in a style that would bore most of her readers she seemed to believe -- and I think she was justified in this belief -- that she had coined a literary mode that combatted boredom by embracing it. She knew how to mind her own business ("Not, as Gertrude Stein explained to Marion Walker, that she at all minds the cause of women or any other cause but it does not happen to be her business") and to keep busy doing exactly what she wanted, which was to make sentences, boring sentences some of them, but others sheer perfection: "I am so sorry, answered Gertrude Stein, but Miss Toklas has a bad tooth and beside we are busy picking wild flowers." When any task (such as communication or obedience) interfered with sentence-making Stein seems to have said I am busy picking wildflowers.

Another activity that Stein refused was backing up. In the automobile as in the sentence, she would only move forward. From the *Autobiography* comes this marvelous description of Stein's progressive writing practice: "Wrong or right, said Gertrude Stein, we are going on. She could not back the car very successfully and indeed I may say even to this day when she can drive any kind of a car anywhere she still does not back a car very well. She goes forward admirably, she does not go backwards successfully. The only violent discussions that we have had in connection with her driving a car have been on the subject of backing." Alice backed Stein; but Stein's sentences appear to have no "backing" (no subtext, ideology, or thematics undergirding them). She backed Picasso, but who backed Stein? No recognizable clique. Her avoidance of retrospection, of anteriority

and interiority, corresponds to her preference for forward motion, right or wrong, usually wrong, and if wrong, somehow right, anyway, because doing the wrong thing prevented Stein from being bored, and allowed her to stay seated, facing the sun.

In *The Making of Americans*, she says "I write for myself and strangers," but mostly she writes for "myself," who sometimes coincides with the reader's "myself." Certainly when I read the following passage from *Making*, I become Stein's "myself," and experience her love of writing and telling: "I love it and I tell it. I love it and now I will write it. This is now a history of my love of it. I hear it and I love it and I write it. . . . I love it and now and always I will write it. . . . This is now a history of the way I love it."

Because Stein never backs up, this love of writing and telling is not regressive, even though it is gloriously infantile. Stein never moves backward. She moves forward into the future of literature. But here, in the future, does she have readers? And although she longed for readers, does it entirely matter? She wrote without an audience, and she wrote against the idea of an audience. From "Identity A Poem": "I am I because my little dog knows me even if the little dog is a big one and yet a little dog knowing me does not really make me be I no not really because after all being I I am I has really nothing to do with the little dog knowing me, he is my audience, but an audience never does prove to you that you are you." Stein's ideal audience is a dog, mute and loyal.

14

Stein's quest was the redefinition of beauty. Although her work seems to repudiate conventional aesthetic beauty, she subtly claimed it. In "Composition as Explanation," she observed: "If every one were not so indolent they would realise that beauty is beauty even when it is irritating and stimulating not only when it is accepted and classic." Stein's irritating surface is nonetheless beautiful, in its occasional straightforwardness as well as in its perpetual flight from directness; the beauty lies in her attention to objects, names, pleasures, commonplaces, banalities, indulgences, impieties, as well as in her unceasing campaign for the preservation of the syllable, the exact sound of one syllable landing next to another. In this attentiveness she is one of our purest poets. Amid the din of her often unmeaningful sentences, the clang of the syllable is always audible. Her words don't hide from a reader's scrutiny. And so I turn to Stein because I want intimacy with language at its most atomistic; I want truck with the grubby particles of English, and with the narcissism of the American voice declaiming the pleasure that may be taken in speech's ordinariness. From *A Long Gay Book* "Pale pet, red pet, pink pet, blue pet, white pet, dark pet, real pet, fresh pet . . ." It is pleasant to greet, as if for the first time, the word "pet," to hear "pet" next to "white" and "dark," to think about petting and about Stein's relation to companions (animal and human), and to consider questions of family, camaraderie, and solitude within the bracing framework of a syllable-by-syllable list, each word ringing out with brass banality -- pale pet, red pet, pink pet, blue pet, white pet, dark pet, fresh pet. . . .

Is this poetry or prose? Thankfully one needn't decide. Stanzas in *Meditation* declares itself poetry, and is divided into verse lines. But much of the work collected in *A Stein Reader* also falls into lines. Do we consider the following passage from "A Circular Play" to be a poem, dialogue from a play, or a series of ultra-brief prose paragraphs?

Sing circles.

Can you believe that Mary Ethel has plans.

Indeed I do and I respect her husband.

Do you dislike her children.

I have not always had a prejudice against twins.

To be catholic to be african to be Eastern.
Have you always had a prejudice against twins.
Tomorrow we go.
If you say so.

Circular watches.

Methods.
How do you recognise hats.
How do you marry.

Are these fragments of dialogue, each separate line to be uttered by a different character? Or are these lines of a poem, spoken by one haphazard yet subtly unified authorial voice? Or are these minute paragraphs of a prose work broken up into titled fragments ("Sing cirdes," "Circular watches")? One reads Stein as if it were poetry not simply because it is dense and highly patterned, but because of its arrangement on the page. Indeed, the passage quoted above is not particularly dense. Each line, interpreted separately, is an ordinary idiomatic statement, located in an implied social milieu. What makes the passage "poetic" is not only the disjunction between the separate lines, and the absence of overall narrative, but the erasure of paragraph: the paragraph -- that prose unit which Stein said was "emotional," as opposed to sentences -- has been eliminated, or converted into a poetic line. Indeed, Stein's paragraphs satisfy because they are radically abbreviated, often as short as "Methods," or "How do you marry," or "If you say so." Stack together fourteen paragraphs as short as "Tomorrow we go," and you have a sonnet.

Here, for example, is a short poem by Stein, from Stanzas in Meditation, notable for the directness of its praise of the landscape which she often refused to describe but always seemed to be staring at ("I can look at a landscape without describing it"):

I could not be in doubt
About.
The beauty of San Remy.
That is to say
The hills small hills
Beside or rather really all behind.
Where the Roman arches stay
One of the Roman arches
Is not an arch
But a monument
To which they mean
Yes I mean I mean.
Not only when but before.
I can often remember to be surprised
By what I see and saw.
It is not only wonderfully
But like before.

Stein refused to submit to the tyranny of writing referentially about a subject. She can say "about" because she rhymes it with "doubt" (she doubts that language can be "about" anything), and because she puts a period after the "about," interrupting the movement toward the direct object, "The beauty of San Remy," which becomes its own sentence.

I said that Stein's principal purpose was redefining beauty; what this project means, in the context of the above stanza, is that sometimes Stein lets herself be surprised by what she sees and what she saw, but usually she will seesaw, and because of her oscillation between tenses and between sight and blindness, the arch will not long remain an arch, the cited object will not long remain cited. Even within the seesawing -- the process of a

paragraph's or sentence's decomposition -- she remains solidly a lover of beauty in Alice and beauty in landscape, beauty in exile and beauty in home. It is dizzying to watch Stein move so confidently across the prose/poetry divide, without embarrassment, and to see her end the long Stanzas with the unemphatic "These stanzas are done," as if saying, Time to move on to other stanzas, or I told you I could write a long poem.

Is Stanzas a poem? Is A Novel of Thank You a novel? Probably A Novel of Thank You is a poem, too. Or else it doesn't matter. Stein impersonating Toklas in the Autobiography says, "I always say that you cannot tell what a picture really is or what an object really is until you dust it every day and you cannot tell what a book is until you type it or proof-read it." A Novel of Thank You is a fake novel; Stanzas in Meditation is a fake poem. They are only novel or poem because they chose the appellation, somewhat arbitrarily. Novels are nice; poems are nice. Stein knew the novel's niceness, wanted to inhabit that niceness, and so often called her works novels. The designation "poem" must have seemed less nice, because she less frequently chose it. Even when she did opt for it, as in "Identity A Poem," she dared us to identify her text as a poem or to distinguish a poem's quiddity. Stein's Stanzas suggest the roominess she still believed could travel under the name "poem," as her Novel suggests the size and permission she believed that "novel" could still, this late, afford. Each book wants to meet its genre head-on: wants to be a novel, wants to be a poem. The intensity of this wish equals our readerly desire to feel contained by genre, to believe that "novel" or "stanzas" can promise a unique brand of aesthetic sensation. The title's Thank You is Stein's statement of wishing the genre well ("thank you for being a novel" or "thank you, novel, for remaining alive"), as Of Meditation is her salute to the stanza, her sanguine promise that stanzas abet meditation rather than impede it.

Stein's method: Call it a novel, or a poem, and put in it everything you want. Everything is nice, and so use everything: In "Composition as Explanation" she described her method as "using everything." The appeal of "poem" or "novel," as genres, today, consists in their promise of having enough room to hold everything and everybody.

15

As a consequence of Stein's immunity to any critical vocabulary that might contain her, when I read A Novel of Thank You I didn't underline passages. I knew that I would not be able to generalize about Stein, or adequately explicate her, and so I left the text unmarked -- except for three ordinary sentences. The first: "Zucheville Dupoint Gavotte, a cheese." Why did I underline it? Because I was grateful that Stein referred to cheese, even a fictional or nonce cheese, whose name sounded like a dance ("gavotte") as well as the sort of ne'er-do-well with whom Becky Sharp, in the latter years of her exiled life, might have whiled away an evening at cards, at some wateringhole along the Riviera. The second line I marked: "Today is most of the time." The sentence reminded me of James Schuyler (I seek his shade in the writers who indirectly influenced him); I was reading A Novel of Thank You in order to explore more deeply the present time of writing (what Stein in "Composition as Explanation" calls a "continuous present") and in order to explore the principle of "using everything," including banality. Also, I wanted to avoid writing, and, while doing so, wanted to contemplate the fierce, engaged poetics that emerges from not writing the kinds of prose and poetry that states of so-called "writing block" can empower. I remain convinced that the work of literature's legendary underproducers (such as Jane Bowles) has much in common with work of logorrheic over-producers (Stein, Trollope); Stein through her continuous present, and Bowles through her unyielding self-scrutiny and self-punishment, found a certain mean sparseness -- a withering conviction that nothing is nice and yet writing may use everything, including the not nice, the dull, the ugly, and the pedestrian. Reading A Novel of Thank You, I wanted to understand how today could be most of the time, and how to find a writing mode that included today and most of the time, a lyric or expository voice

that might resemble silence, mumbling, droning -- that might need, in fact, to include silence, or exist in dialogue with silence. Stein's writing makes most sense if it is read aloud; and yet hers is the most silent voice I know -- silent because, under the guise of including everything in the world, it includes remarkably little.

The third line I marked in *A Novel of Thank You*. "Any one can use a chapter and never recall it at all." Use everything, Stein counsels; use everything, including boredom, and the dread of boredom. The value of her work is the use we make of it as we read it, and the uses we contrive, after the fact of reading, even after the memory of her work's detail vanishes. I don't remember anything about *A Novel of Thank You*, except that it fed my conviction that writing and reading are vehicles for exploring the vastness that lies outside a civilization's regular patterns of commerce and conversation. The book also convinced me that many things in the world are nice, and that writing, even not nice writing, has the power to point out this astonishing fact.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): LEON LEVENSTEIN New Orleans, 1975--Mardi Gras

~~~~~

By WAYNE KOESTENBAUM

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM, an Associate Professor of English at Yale, is the author of *Jackie Under My Skin: Interpreting an Icon* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (Poseidon), and two volumes of verse, *Rhapsodies of a Repeat Offender* and *Ode to Anna Moffo and Other Poems* (Persea).

---

Copyright of Parnassus: Poetry in Review is the property of Poetry in Review Foundation and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.